

Susan and Goliath:

By Mary Reed

My daughter's odyssey to advance to high school from seventh grade began with a simple statement to me. In January 2007, we were driving in the car, and out of the blue Susan (not her real name) asked me, "So, do you think I could skip eighth grade next year?"

She had complained about mundane worksheets and boring classes for more than a year, so I wasn't terribly surprised by her question. With a student body of more than 1,200 students, the middle school had a nearly impossible task in meeting the needs of its gifted and talented students, even for a school in a relatively strong school district.

I told Susan that if she wanted to skip a grade she would have to do her own research and present it to the school administrators herself. Her argument would be much more powerful coming directly from her. If she felt she was mature and intelligent enough to skip eighth grade, then she should be able to handle expressing herself to the school administration.

Doing Our Homework

Susan spent the next few weeks finding articles on acceleration on the Internet, outlining background information by experts to help with her argument as to why she should be allowed to skip. At the same time, Susan's dad and I did our own research on the options for gifted children. As her parents, we needed to be informed and believe in our hearts and minds that skipping would be the right choice for her. The most influential book we found was *A Nation Deceived: How Schools Hold Back America's Brightest Students, Volumes I & II* (2004). We also read *Genius Denied* (2005), *Re-Forming Gifted Education* (2002), and *Empowering Gifted Minds* (2003). Current experts all agreed that, in certain instances, full-grade acceleration was an excellent and viable option.

Document Everything

Years before, I had started a document called "Susan's Kudos List." Broken down by school year, the list included

anything that was relevant to her advancement, which included her report cards and course work. At the end of each year, Susan and I went through her papers and decided which ones best represented her accomplishments for the year. This documentation became important as we went forward with efforts to have Susan grade skipped.

From the start, we documented all contact with Susan's teachers and the school staff. We also kept all e-mails and correspondence pertaining to our request. In addition, I kept a daily journal of what was happening and noted phone conversations. When it became clear that there would be resistance to Susan's grade skipping, this documentation, too, played an important role.

Chain of Command

Based on our research, advice to parents was to work up the chain of command, so Susan began with the G/T (gifted and talented) coordinator, the one person at the school that she knew the best and had advocated on Susan's behalf since starting middle school. Generally, beginning with a teacher may be more desirable, but the G/T coordinator had been a believer in Susan's potential for a year and a half.

G/T Coordinator

Susan needed to find out if she even qualified for skipping a grade. The middle school G/T coordinator was incredibly helpful in working with Susan to sort out what she wanted and the best options for achieving them. She made Susan feel like she could conquer the world. Susan showed her the outline and presented her case, which was a turning point for Susan; on her own she had talked to an adult and effectively articulated her desires. The G/T coordinator was excited that Susan finally might be able

to be in classes with her intellectual peers, instead of doing work below her capability.

Teachers

Susan spoke to her teachers. Only one teacher was not supportive, but all respectfully listened. Her favorite teacher, who teaches science, was extremely supportive, which added to her excitement. A couple of teachers said that they personally didn't believe in acceleration, but she was certainly intelligent enough. One teacher was incredulous and asked her why she would want to leave her friends to go on to high school. Susan's response was "I'd rather spend the next 4 years happy in high school than the next 5 years miserable because I'm not being challenged."

School Counselor

Susan's next stop was her school counselor. He could not have been more gracious to her or more excited about her proposal. He asked her if she wanted to go over to the high school, and she immediately said yes. She spoke with one of the high school counselors, met several students at the high school, and looked around. She was absolutely enchanted with what she encountered. Kids were studying the things she wanted to be learning. The work was meaningful and the courses were interesting. That visit convinced her that she was doing the right thing.

She asked the middle school counselor if he could help her arrange a meeting with the principal to show him a PowerPoint presentation she was preparing. The counselor was thrilled to see that she was using the things she learned in school for real-world applications.

Threatened Administrators

This is when things started to get dicey. The school administrators got wind of what Susan was doing, and from our viewpoint, seemed extremely threatened. Although Susan was simply seeking information to make her decision, the administrators felt that she was initiating the acceleration process without consulting them first. She was immediately taken out of the loop. All teachers and staff were ordered to not discuss this with us, and she never did get her meeting with the principal.

Vice-Principal

Susan's dad realized things had gotten out of hand when he asked for an information meeting with the G/T coordinator and school counselor. Instead we ended up in a meeting with the vice-principal and the school psychologist.

The vice-principal explained that the district would probably not be doing any single subject skipping the next year, implying that a full grade skip was impossible. He went through all the usual reasons why administrators are reluctant to let students skip: What about not having a driver's license when all her friends have one? What about leaving her middle school friends behind? What about her friends dating and she can't? What if we let her skip and then every smart student at school wants to skip?

Finally, the vice-principal indicated the process for acceleration would be initiated. Odd, because we had not yet asked for her to be accelerated—we were only gathering information. The school psychologist said she would administer an IQ test, but the vice-principal sharply shut her down and said there would be no IQ test. Rather, a committee of her teachers and staff would consider the request and notify us within 2 weeks of their decision. That meeting convinced us that Susan belonged at the high school, so we agreed to start the process.

We had test scores that the middle school did not have, so I gave the school psychologist Susan's School and College Ability Test (SCAT) scores from the Johns Hopkins Center for Talented Youth, but she didn't have time to look at them. I got her Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) scores and brought them to the scheduling coordinator who handles the SATs—she didn't want them, either. However, the G/T coordinator was excited to have the scores, which indicated an achievement level equivalent to an average high school senior.

Request Advice From Talented Youth Centers

We were in uncharted territory. I contacted a psychologist at Johns Hopkins Center for Talented Youth who said that, based on what I told her, Susan sounded like an excellent candidate for skipping. She advised us to try and enlist the help of one of Susan's teachers. We decided to contact Susan's favorite teacher. However, he was instructed not to talk to us about this issue and couldn't help. We decided to wait and see what the school decided before planning any future actions.

Hitting a Wall

Two weeks later we again met with the vice-principal. He immediately said that Susan would not skip. He was full of platitudes that felt insulting and made very little sense. Susan didn't fall into the prototype for the perfect skipping candidate nor was she the smartest student in her class. Her test scores weren't even high enough to skip in a single subject, but he'd still be willing to skip her in math and French.

No pre-AP classes were offered for eighth graders, but there would be differentiation, which focused on depth not breadth because students can't go beyond a year's curriculum. He emphasized that Susan was not bored in class as evidenced by her paying attention, asking questions, and doing the work.

He suggested meeting her academic needs with extracurricular activities and participating in sports. Academically, she was on the right track, and there would be no additional testing. He said, "Isn't it better for her to be safe in eighth grade than to possibly fail in ninth?" They just weren't willing to take the risk unless it was a sure thing.

We asked him about the current research on acceleration or grade skipping. He wasn't familiar with any research on acceleration, and frankly believed that the teachers knew the kids and the research was unimportant. Besides, "the team" was strongly in favor of her staying in her grade. We also were not allowed to see the team's report. As we left the meeting, we expressed to him that we all wanted the same thing: to be sure Susan was in the right academic placement, but disagreed on how to accomplish that. We told him we'd be in touch. He asked to talk to Susan and, not realizing what he would say, we agreed.

Later that day, Susan got home from school after her meeting with the vice-principal. He informed Susan she wasn't going to skip, and instead should sign up for sports and refine her time management and leadership skills. He also said that we agreed with him about the decision not to skip a grade, so she assumed her fight was over. The vice-principal had manipulated and outright lied to us. We told her that we most definitely did not agree with the school. She wanted to continue to fight to skip and was hurt and angry by the school's blatant attempt to squash her potential.

Meeting With the Principal

My husband and I were extremely upset by the school's handling of the situation. We scheduled a meeting with the school principal, agreeing that we had to stay calm, be respectful, not accuse the school of anything, or place blame.

According to the principal, the process for acceleration followed district rules. He invited us to look for ourselves, as the policy was online. We did evaluate the policy and found several points that were not done by the book—including never being given the form to begin the acceleration process, not being allowed to know what was said in the meetings, not utilizing all of Susan's test scores, and never getting the decision in writing from the school.

We informed the principal that we would be getting our own assessment done by an objective third party and hoped that he would agree to accelerate Susan if the assessment recommended skipping. At this point, he turned the case over to the school district.

An Objective Expert

An outside psychologist would provide an objective and fair point of view, and as a family, we agreed to abide by the psychologist's recommendation. The local university's gifted and talented program referred a well-respected local psychologist who specializes in working with gifted and talented students and their families.

Susan was assessed in March 2007. The assessments used by the psychologist included the Wechsler Intelligence

Scale for Children (WISC-IV) and Conner's Parent Rating Scale, along with an interview with both Susan and me and her developmental history. The psychologist recommended with absolutely no reservations that Susan be accelerated to the ninth grade for the next school year. Even honors and AP classes might still not be challenging enough.

Other District G/T Programs

While we were waiting to receive the assessment report from the psychologist, I talked to other districts about their programs, wanting to get a feel for what they were doing for their gifted and talented students. In particular, one local school district had a fantastic G/T program that often accelerated middle school students. Each child in that district was reviewed Individually rather than against predetermined criteria.

District Personnel

Once the psychologist's assessment arrived, I called the district's director of secondary education, who asked for the information that I had compiled. Included were the assessment report, a complete list of Susan's tests, Susan's own outline of why she felt she should skip, my report of Susan's accomplishments, and the chronology of events leading up to this point. He passed along her file to a district psychologist for review.

Within a few days, we received approval for Susan to skip to ninth grade and be tested by the high school for math placement. In addition, she would be placed in all available honors classes, including accelerated math class, honors English, and honors science.

In Conclusion

This was an odyssey in the true sense of the word with many twists and turns. We all felt dizzy by the time it was over. The key for us, as a family, was to make sure that this was what Susan wanted and that she was both emotionally and mentally ready.

Now that Susan's second year of high school is nearly finished, we feel vindicated. She loves high school. She was on the A Honor Roll her entire freshman year. Her freshman extracurricular activities include second-year Latin, German Club, and German Folk Dancing. Her sophomore year has been more challenging due to four honors classes and one AP class, but she is thriving. She is still involved in Latin and German Club. By her junior year, she plans to switch over to our state's Post-Secondary Education Option and attend college full-time. Her plan is to go to St. Mary's Honors College of Maryland and study anthropology and sociology. She is a young woman with clear goals and high ambitions. She also has collaborated with the Japanese American Community with her work on a Japanese American Peace Memorial that honors

Japanese Americans interned during World War II. She is thrilled to be able to help the internees find some closure with their experience and also teach about this time in history through their Web site and videos.

On a more day-to-day level, this has been nothing but a positive experience for Susan. She was always excited about school, but now all the work is meaningful. She feels perfectly challenged.

She has made many friends at school, but she does not socialize much after school or on weekends. When Susan does want to go to a movie or do something special outside of school, she always calls one of her friends from middle school. We discussed the rules as soon as she learned that she could skip. There have been no arguments over dating, riding with friends that drive, or any other social issue. There are restrictions that her peers at the high school may not have, but she enjoys academics and the natural high that she gets from doing well in school.

Psychologically I see a different person. Before she skipped, I saw a girl struggling with how to stay motivated in classes that barely tapped her potential. Now I see a young woman excited about all that life has to offer. She has more self-esteem, easily approaches teachers for help, and believes in herself. She has taken responsibility for her life path by researching colleges, forming her own opinions, and staying grounded in the present while looking ahead to the future.

Susan did slay Goliath—not with a stone, but with her intelligence and maturity.

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Author's Note

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